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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the meaning of two concepts: parent involvement and professionalization of early childhood educators. The relationship between the concepts is also considered. Parent involvement is described and defined in many ways, and there is little empirical evidence on which to base decisions concerning what kind and what degree of parent involvement early childhood programs should try to implement. Efforts to conceptualize and work towards increased professionalism in early childhood education have provided direction for the field, but it seems timely to examine what constitutes the goals and outcomes of the struggle for professionalism. If a traditional model of professions is used, parent involvement seems to incline toward parent education. If the goal is to encourage maximum parent influence and control, or to strive for continuity of care by becoming partners with parents, then an alternate model of professionalization may need to be considered. If the goal of parent involvement is empowerment, those in the field should examine the issue of who has the power to give. The ecological model of professionalization, in which the interplay of forces inside and outside the occupational group determines professional status, is a good place to begin a discussion of staff, parents, and empowerment. (SH)

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PROFESSIONALIZATION AND PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: COMPLEMENTARY OR CONFLICTING STRATEGIES?

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INTRODUCTION

It is well accepted today that high quality early childhood programs are fundamental to fostering the healthy development of young children. There is an increasing volume of literature that links the provision of quality programs to upgrading and improving the professional status of early childhood teachers (Daniel, 1990; Whitebook et al, 1989). Parent involvement in early childhood programs is also seen by many leaders in the field as a crucial element in the delivery of successful programs. However, seldom have these two concepts, upgrading the professional status of staff, and parent involvement in early childhood programs, been considered together. Will upgrading the professional status of early childhood staff have any impact on the level of parent involvement encouraged or tolerated? Conversely, could maximizing parent involvement and influence undermine the efforts of staff to implement developmentally appropriate programs and practice according to the beliefs and values of their profession?

The answer to these and other questions will arise from a better understanding of the meaning and nature of both concepts. It is well known that parent involvement is a confusing term, meaning many different things to different people. One researcher referred to it as a "dustbin term" (Smith, 1980) after she interviewed numbers of teachers and parents and found little consistencey or congruency in

interpretations. Similarly, the words professional and professionalization evoke a great deal of confusion. This is particularly so in view of the fact that it is used by almost every occupational group that advertizes, from chimney cleaners to chiropracters. What do early childhood teachers really refer to when they say they are striving to upgrade the status of their profession? The following section attempts to clarify the use of both terms in the early chilhhood literature.

Clarifying the Meaning of Parent Involvement

Although parent involvement is often cited as a prerequisite to quality care, the meaning of the term varies significantly in different discussions of the concept. (Berger, 1987; Handler, 1971; Smith, 1980; Morrison, 1988). A review of numerous studies in the early childhood literature suggests that there have been three main goals for parent involvement in early childhood programs: parent education (Fein, 1980; Schlossman, 1976; Clarke-Stewart, 1988; Meyerhoff and White, 1990); parent influence or control over programs (Greenblatt, 1977; Almy, 1975; Fein, 1980); and communication to ensure continuity of care for the child (Gestwicki, 1987; Lane, 1975). Recently, the concept of empowerment has begun to seep into the early childhood literature (Powell, 1989) as a goal of working with parents.

Parent education has long been seen as a primary goal of early childhood programs. Since the Head Start era, a vast

number of parent involvement programs have been implemented, with a proportionally minute number having been substantially evaluated. Stevens (1978) has identified the characteristics of parent education programs that have proven to be effective. Substantial funding, direction by highly qualified leaders, careful piloting and monitoring of project activities, and the provision of extensive and intensive programs were isolated as key components. Steven's review concludes that the myriad of existing parent education programs that do not fulfill these requirements cannot be assumed to have any lasting effect on children or parents. Indeed, several authors have cautioned against overenthusiasm regarding parent education (Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Gordon, 1990; Brim, 1965; Schlossman, 1976), concerned that it may undermine parents' confidence and cause alienation and distress in the family. Other authors (Ade and Hoot, 1976; Swick et al, 1989; Tudor, 1977) have cast doubt on the motivation and qualifications and ability of day care staff to plan, implement and monitor parent education programs.

It is important to highlight the underlying assumption of parent education programs. In a sense they are based on a deficit model of the family, and the assumption that someone (the educator or professional) has possession of knowledge, skills or attitudes that the parents do not have. This assumption has needs to be examined critically.

The literature pertaining to the second goal of parent involvement, parent influence or control, is largely descriptive rather than evaluative (Greenblatt, 1977; Fein, 1980;). The objectives have been to ensure the democratic rights of parents to exercise some control at the interface of education and values and different cultures (Yawkey and Bakawa-Evenson, 1975); to ensure that programs would be sensitive to, and meet the needs of the populations they served (Almy, 1975) and to reduce the apathy and hopelessness of poverty (Fein, 1980).

Gordon (1990) has noted the irony inherent in mandated participation of the poor in the policy formulation and curriculum development of preschool programs. Children were assumed to be in need of compensatory preschool programs due to parents' lack of knowledge and skills. Yet, those same parents were to be instrumental in the development of programs. Shapiro (1977) has demonstrated that parent influence on programs was not proportionate to the number of parents involved, but that when parents did influence the program, the result seemed to be a less child centered approach. Parental influence, then, led to program changes that could be seen as contrary to the views held by traditional early childhood educationalists.

Several studies have looked at the impact of informal parent influence, and some conflicting findings exist. Joffe (1977) and Corwin and Wagenaar(1977) found that highly trained professional staff were less likely to be influenced

by parents, while other authors (Swick and McNight, 1989; Lombana, 1983) suggest that staff training is linked to more openness to parents.

Parent influence on day care programs seems especially problematic. According to Gestwicki (1987) few day care programs have mandated parent participation, and several studies (Zigler and Turner, 1982; Powell, 1978; 1980) have highlighted the lack of contact and communication between parents and staff, which would deem parent influence unlikely.

Parent involvement pertaining to the third goal, ensuring continuity of experience, has little empirical support. It is based on a common sense assumption that the more communication that exists between staff and parents, the more consistency there will be in the settings in which the child spends his/her time. This assumption has not been tested by research. A critical review of much of the professional literature on communicating with parents suggests an implicit assumption that consistency will occur as a result of parents changing their childrearing habits rather than teachers changing programs as a result of parent-staff communication. Newsletters, parent teacher conferences, and other often described strategies of parent-staff communication often tend to be one way - from teachers to parents. In addition, the little or superficial contact between staff and parents that has been highlighted earlier (Powell, 1978; 1980; 1983; Kontos and Wells, 1986; Zigler

and Turner, 1982) casts doubt on the ability of early childhood staff or parents to effect changes in each other that could ultimately lead to a greater consistency of care.

Recently the concept of parental empowerment has emerged in the early childhood literature (Powell, 1989). Essential to this ideology is that those working with parents learn more about how people are handling their own problems in living, and that these learnings become public in order that changes can be made in policies and programs so that people gain more control of their lives (Rappaport (1981). Cochran (1988) has described an early childhood model program based on the concept of parental empowerment, and has provided evidence of the partial success of that program. However, the program described is a demonstration program quite unlike many early childhood programs in terms of funding, staff qualifications, and target population. In addition, the concept of empowerment of parents cannot be considered in isolation from the "empowerers" - the program staff. Often early childhood teachers, particularly those in day care, are low paid and undervalued. The recent American national day care staffing study (Whitebook et al., 1990) and a study of day care staff in Alberta (LaGrange and Read, 1990) suggests that working conditions, salaries, and morale of staff could lead one to conclude that it is the early childhood staff themselves that require empowerment.

In summary, parent involvement is described and defined in many ways, and there is little empirical evidence on

which to base decisions concerning what kind and what degree of parent involvement early childhood programs should attempt to implement. There have been, to date, no studies which carefully explore the perceptions of parents and early childhood teachers. Studies of this nature would assist in formulating realistic goals for parent involvement in early childhood programs, which in turn would assist in determining the required knowledge base, skills and professional attitudes that should be incorporated into the training of early childhood professionals.

Professionalization of Early Childhood

Leaders in the field of early childhood education have relied on sociological studies of professions and professionalization for a conceptual framework within which to place their discussions of the early childhood field (Katz, 1988; Griffin, 1989; Spodek et al, 1988). Katz (1988) claims that "most scholars on the subject of professions seem to agree that eight criteria must be met before an occupation may be classified as a profession". These criteria are: social necessity; altruism, autonomy, code of ethics; distance from the client; standards of practice; prolonged training and specialized knowledge. Much of the early childhood literature on the subject uses these (and other) criteria both as a yardstick and a prescription. The yardstick tells us "how far we have come". And the prescription tells us what we have left to do in our relentless struggle for professionalization. For example,

the NAEYC's recent development of a code of ethics and standards of practice is seen as an important move in the direction of professionalization. Recent advocacy efforts concerning training requirements for day care presonel reflects usage of the yardstick. How can we claim that we have specialized knowledge if "anyone" can work in child care. Clearly, if we want to be considered a true profession we need to demand that all practitioners have "specialized knowledge" acquired through education and trainning.

A somewhat cynical view of our field lends little optimism to those committed to professionalization. We do not measure extremely well by this yardstick: there is no consenses concerning the required "specialized knowledge"; the control, training and licensing of early childhood teachers remains haphazard, and the ambivalence in our society regarding the necessity or desirability of early childhood services seem inconcgruent with the image of a profession according to the characteristics iterated above.

However, the use of sociological literature in the early childhood field as a reference for professionalization has been somewhat misleading. First of all, sociologists do not agree on the criteria that are prerequisites for a profession. One reviewer (Johnson (1972) of over sixty articles in the professional literature found that no single characteristic of a profession was found in all, nor could two studies agree on the same combination of attributes. Moreover, some of the characteristics relate to an

idealized or outdated view of the professions studied. The altruism, for example of doctors and lawyers is questionable, in view of the renumeration received for their services and the autonomy of many professions has been questioned by the massive move away from client-professional dyads into corporations and agencies.

Sociologists, therefore, have moved beyond delineating the characteristicw of professions and have shed doubt on the usefulness of this approach, and the early childhood literature is beginning to question the quest for professionalization (Silin, 1988; Spodek et al, 1988). Some of the questions raised by sociologists of professions in the post-"characteristics" era could be fruitful areas of discussion within are own field. For example, Bucher and Stelling (1961) question the role of associations in the professionalizing process of occupations. They stress that the activity of the associations, such as the preparation of a code of ethics,and standard setting, may present a deceptive picture of consensus within the occupational group. The American National Association for the Education of Young Children has, in the past decade, been involved in these and other activities. However, only approximately 10 percent of employees in early childhood services belong to that association. As Jorde Bloom points out (1989) there is tremendous diversity in the child-care - early childhood education occupation, and to date we are only beginning to accrue information concerning the views of these people.

In other words, it is not at all clear to what extent the commitment to professionalization, as expressed by the leaders in the field of early childhood education, is shared by the majority of those actually working with children in the field.

There is a significant body of sociological literature that criticizes society's trust in the professions. McKinlay (1973) believes that trust in professionals yields unnecessary dependence and lack of self confidence in peoples ability to solve problems and run their own lives. Katz (1988) has alluded to the questionable desirability of client practitioner distance, as is characterized between clients and practitioners in established occupations. Others have examined the question of "specialized knowledge" in relation to early childhood practitioners. Silin (1988) has expressed the view that our quest for professionalism has lead to an undue emphasis on the "scientific" knowledge, at the expense of a search for a holistic approach that would better prepare professionals to work with young children. In addition, we must ask whether we want this knowledge to become our exclusive domain, or whether it would benefit the children if society as a whole, particularly parents, shared our insights into the minds and hearts of children. In other words, having the upper hand on knowledge may increase our professional status, but is that in the best interest of the children?

While the efforts to conceptualize and work towards increasing the level of professionalization in early childhood education and day care have provided direction for the field, it would seem timely to critically examine the issue of professionalization. The characteristics of a profession are not, and never have been, written in stone. As more and more females enter high status occupational groups, the idealized notion of professions is beginning change (Noddings, 1990). Notions such as "relationship oriented, warmth, caring, empowering" traditionally linked with female dominated (and lower status) professions may be seeping into the venacular of the more powerful professions. In other words, we need to ask whether our attempts to emulate the high status professionals are leading us to a final product that is realistic or desirable. Perhaps we need to change the definition, rather than to change ourselves to fit an inappropriate definition.

Abbot (1983) has proposed a systems or ecological model to describe how any occupational group achieves and maintains professional status. According to this model, it is the interplay of forces both within and outside the occupational group that will determine professional status. Thus, decisions made from within the profession (such as determination of educational standards, ethical codes, and so forth) are seen as insufficient on their own. Forces such as inter and intra-professional conflict, demographic changes, and the values dominant in our society will all

impact the status of the early childhood profession. Abbot's model reminds us of the need for humility. We can engage in all the professionalizing activities we chose to, but it is other groups, the most important of which may be the parents, who will ultimately play a leading role in the determination of our professional status.

CONCLUSION

Is increasing the professional status of early childhood teachers likely to encourage or hinder parent involvement in early childhood programs? Clearly it depends on what the goals and outcomes of the struggle for professionalization entail, and on how parent involvement is conceptualized and implemented by both parents and staff. Upon reflection it seems that if we chose to aspire to a model of professions based on traditional concepts, parent involvement will lean towards parent education. The "professionals" armed with their knowledge, status and power, will be in a position to teach parents how to better do their job. However, if our goal is to encourage maximum parent influence and control, or to genuinely strive towards ensuring continuity of care by becoming "partners" with parents, then perhaps we may need to consider an alternate model of professionalization. We cannot wave the banner of partnership and at the same time assume that we know better than parents what is best for the children. If the goal of parent involvement is empowerment, we need to take a close look at who has the power to give. In some cases, it is clear that parents will

have the edge, and indeed it is the staff who are disempowered, through lack of recognition, sufficient wages, and so forth. The ecological model of professionalization, described by Abbot, would be a good place to begin a discussion of staff, parents, and empowerment.

Unfortunately, the dominant state in early childhood education and child care today seems to be an existing low level of professionalization, and little parent involvement: a model of two disconnected systems in which the child goes back and forth. This does little justice to children, early childhood teachers, or to parents.

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